MANCHESTER: DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS OF AN ECONOMIC INITIATIVE?

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Introduction

The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) trails in its wake a host of speculations as to the social, cultural and political transformations that are set to develop with them (Donk and Tops 1992). Whilst some of the literature reflects upon the implications for civil liberties such as free speech (de Sola Pool 1983) others have focused upon the regenerative potential to the public sphere (Rheingold 1995) and in so doing many invoke the imagery of revolution to convey the extent to which ICTs will be responsible for the resuscitation of the civic infrastructure (Kirschner 1991; Snider 1994; Toffler 1980). Whilst this acknowledgement of the importance of the media and communications industry has been gathering pace since the 1960s, the position of ICTs as the blocks upon which national policy proposals for reform and regeneration of the democratic corpus have been built, was not cemented until the vice-president of the USA, Al Gore thrust upon an unsuspecting world the metaphor of the "information superhighway." In his attempt to convince the American public of the regenerative potential of ICTs Gore has invoked historical images of previous developments in communications technologies — from the transcontinental telegraph to CNN and the fax machine — to support his thesis that the ability to communicate electronically has informed and shaped America and in so doing critically influenced the development of American democracy (Gore 1994). Politicians across the globe have since been trying to capture the respective imaginations of their citizenries by employing the rhetorical devices of the metaphor of the information superhighway (Blair 1995).

This paper takes a critical look at the notions of democracy which are embedded in both the political rhetoric of the information superhighway and at some of the academic literature which has set out to address the crisis of democracy to which this rhetoric refers. I will argue that these notions do not constitute a proper debate about the relationship between ICTs and democracy. Looking at the particular example of Manchester City Council's attempt to develop Manchester as an Information City I will argue that such initiatives need to be framed within the broader debates around the development of a reformulated public sphere.

It is worth looking more closely at the technological basis for some of the claims being made in the metaphor of the "information superhighway." The digitalisation of data has allowed computer mediated communication (CMC) to be more than simply a mechanism for the exchange of text, facilitating the manipulation and transportation of sound and moving and static images quickly and easily. Whilst the economics of information collection and provision are undoubtedly being affected by the increasing possibilities for digital data, is there a feature of "Being Digital" (Negroponte 1995) that makes the transmission of information bits along the information superhighway qualitatively different from the delivery of the same information and services via the telephone, the postal service or through physical interpersonal interaction? It is interactivity which has been heralded as the harbinger of social change (Kirschner 1991) with real time communication between individuals including the visual interactivity implied in the concept of teleconferencing and the additional consumer choice vis-à-vis the timing and format of the delivery of information and entertainment services. Whilst many of the applications now being developed both for CMC and broadband communication channels may be useful for business purposes a degree of caution is required before extrapolating wider social and political ramifications.

The "information superhighway" metaphor is grounded in the assumption that communication and media structures influence the shape and operation of the political institutions which fall within the boundaries of the same nation-state. Manifestations of democracy undoubtedly vary from one nation-state to another. However, the assertion that the adoption of a media perspective in the study of government systems is necessary if we are to "understand that the structural and formal features of communication technologies privilege perceptual modes that encourage some forms of government and discourage others," (Bertelsen 1992) is highly contestable and is susceptible to caricature and the accusation of technological determinism. Bertelsen's mistake is the confusion of political structure with social and cultural trends. Developments in communication systems will lead to shifts in patterns of social interaction (Betteridge 1996) but the manifestations of democracy have a structure, the evolutionary history of which is more complex than Bertelsen's approach might imply. Whilst others have tried to argue that the media and communications structures should be regarded as important factors influencing the development of political systems rather than as determinants of political systems (Arterton 1987), the Manchester Information City initiative indicates that, in this case at least, the existing political system was crucial in directing the development of the structure of the electronic communications and information applications described below.

Claims for Democratic Renewal

Whilst the policy documents which have been produced as a result of these debates encompass a broad range of policy areas, including economic development; social benefits such as educational and health care applications; and the increased efficiency of service and information provision, it is the claims for democratic renewal which I seek to explore. Firstly, what type of democracy is being deployed in these rhetorical devices, secondly how have these notions of democracy impacted upon the on-going work of Manchester City Council in their attempt to create an Information City.

What are the symptoms of this crisis of democracy which political leaders have sort to address and what are the causes of this crisis? The most commonly cited evidence that democracy is in crisis is the decline of citizen participation in the central mechanisms of democracy — elections — and the cause of this decline is more often than not ascribed to a sense of alienation consisting of distrust of the political class and apathy with regard to political issues (Barber 1984). Such analyses rest upon a number of assumptions; firstly, that the lack of electoral participation is the result of dissatisfaction with, rather than a level of comfort with, the operation of democratic mechanisms; secondly, that participatory democracy is an ideal model of political organisation; and thirdly, that this model of democracy is attainable through the facilitation of communication between certain groups in society, generally, the citizens and their representatives. Whilst the ability of citizens to engage with each other and with their representatives in debate about issues of a public and political nature is, for the purposes of this paper, accepted as being a desirable end goal, the emphasis upon a vertical interactive participation and the formalised recording of opinions is too narrow a focus for the achievement of this aim. The democracy which is envisaged by writers such as Arterton (1987) can best be described as a kind of "MacDemocracy," characterised by numerous outlets (public access points), a homogenised product (one debate in one unified public sphere) and an emphasis on efficiency (high speed and low cost delivery of information and services). This paper is an attempt to explore the nature of the rhetorical devices and systematic arguments which have privileged an inappropriate emphasis on this MacDonald's style democracy.

I wish to argue that whilst, at its outset, the Manchester City Initiative did not employ the language of democratic revolution such as has been utilised at a national and supranational level, and in similar city based initiatives in the USA, the work being undertaken through the Manchester Initiative, including the HOST services and the Electronic Village Halls which comprise the main body of the initiative, is helping to foster a climate in which deliberative democracy could develop. My argument is based on the premise that democracy requires, first and foremost, the skills to understand the political information under deliberation and the incentive to make use or acquire these skills, i.e. the need for citizens to feel that they have a stake in the outcome of deliberative democracy. To this end I will draw upon some preliminary research which I have undertaken on the development of the Manchester HOST initiative and situate it within the context of the wider debates which are taking place on the potential usage of ICTs to enhance democratic participation, focusing primarily on debates taking place in the UK and the USA.

The democratic conception employed in the Manchester initiative benefits from

three different angles of analysis: (1) a **historical analysis** traces the origins of the initiative, (2) a **national cultural approach** situates the Manchester City project within a UK-European framework, and (3) an "**ecology of games**" perspective.

History

The viability of the city in the face of a set of economic changes such as industrial decline and ecological deterioration has been identified as one of the major problems facing local government in the 1990s (O'Connel and O'Tuama 1995). A number of academics have sought to address these problems within the locus of the development and use of ICTs at the city level (Bellamy and Taylor 1994, Graham 1990, Castells 1989). Manchester City Council drew heavily upon these models of urban regeneration and built its plans for the Information City Initiative upon the premise that "new information and communications technologies are playing an increasingly important role ... in providing the dynamic for the emerging 'information economy,' or 'information society' where multimedia based teleservices ... and teleworking represent a major economic change comparable to a new industrial revolution" (Carter 1995a, 1).

These concerns are reflected in the origins of the Manchester Information City initiative in the Centre for Economic Research (CER) at Manchester Metropolitan University and in the Economic Development Department of Manchester City Council. In order to win the initial 300,000 Urban Programme grant from the Department of the Environment a series of face to face negotiations between the City Council Development Department and civil servants at the department of the environment took place over a twelve month period, and during this time the civil servants were gradually convinced of the relevancy of ICTs to economic development (Carter 1995b). The first feasibility study was undertaken by the CER and a co-operative telematics provider called Soft Solution (Leach et al. 1990) to consider the possibility of transporting rural telecottages to an urban environment in the form of Electronic Village Halls. In 1990 The Manchester Initiative was launched, explicitly to help develop local regional development strategies by facilitating access to ICTs for small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs — Leach 1992). This historical origin goes someway to explain the lack of explicit reference to democratic aims of the project and the lack of political dimension generally to what was at the time considered to be a purely economic initiative.

National Context

A secondary outcome of the origin of the project relates to the fact that, in the UK, these information city debates have been confined to urban studies and local government departments and, whilst within this field it is widely accepted that telecommunications are playing an increasingly important role in the restructuring of the relationships between cities, enterprises and global economic networks, "there has been a notable failure to analyse in detail the policy processes that are shaping these projects and policies or the wider sets of relations between telecommunications and urban policies at the local, national and supra-national levels within which they develop" (Graham 1995, 358). The Manchester Information City initiative has not linked into the national policy debate. One reason for this could be the competition for funding between different regions (Walker 1996) which acts to set different local and regional projects against each other rather than fostering a climate of co-operation and potential integration.

However, the nature of the debate surrounding the use of ICTs has been slower to embrace the democratic implications than in the USA. What national debate there has been about the use of ICTs in the public sector has focused primarily on issues of efficiency in the management and delivery of services (Horrocks and Webb 1994). Whilst this could be a direct result of the Thatcherite emphasis on public spending cuts and the general climate of the 1980's in which civil society was subordinated to the official language of citizen as consumer, articulated through the introduction of Charters outlining minimum levels of service and the promise of redress in the event of these standards failing to be met. Local government in the UK has less scope for the development of local projects as it has both less autonomy and less resources than equivalent bodies in the USA (Horrocks and Webb 1994, 29).

Ecology of Games

An "ecology of games" approach (Dutton and Guthrie 1991) provides a useful model through which to trace the evolution of the Manchester initiative and to expose the ways in which Manchester's Information City Initiative is conceptually different from similar city based initiatives using ICTs in other parts of Europe and the USA. The "ecology of games" analysis examined the influence of competing and co-operative decision-making amongst the "players" within the Santa Monican public information utility and assessed the overall outcome as the accumulative effect of a series of incremental decisions. It is useful with regard to the Manchester Initiative because an "ecology of games" tolerates a degree of fluidity in the way in which concepts such as democracy have been employed as the project has evolved.

One of the factors which is brought into view with such an analysis is the political affiliations of the "players" in the Manchester initiative. The company which has been providing telematics services for the Manchester initiative since its launch in February 1991 is a co-operative called Soft Solution Ltd which, under the name of Poptel, provides telematics services to the Labour Party and much of the Trade Union movement. The individuals who set up Poptel — which stands for Popular Telematics — have all been politically active on the left and envisaged their organisation as a "radical Reuters," through which environmental and left-wing activists could receive and publish literature globally, a capacity which had previously been economically impossible. It was on the basis of this conception of popular telematics that the Labour Party run City Council were persuaded to rejected a proposal for a privately run teleport aimed at servicing the business community (Walker 1996) in favour of a system which was part funded by public grants, thereby fostering the principle of equal access to ICTs as a fundamental prerequisite to the evolution of telematics services. However, whilst it has been argued that "the left has ... tended to fall back either on idealist formulations of free communications with no organisational substance or material support or on technical utopianism that sees the expansion of channels of communication as inherently desirable because pluralistic" (Garnham 1993, 364), the Left-wing orientation of Soft Solution and of Manchester City Council, did not hinder the decision to seek private funds in order to construct a private/public partnership which would ensure the development of telematics services within the city have a community directed approach to the provision and pricing of services whilst not relying upon a unilateral, public source of income.

Geography of the Information City

The Information City initiative is centred around the Manchester HOST, which consists of a minicomputer which is linked to the international GeoNet system, and through this to the Internet. Local personal computers are able to access the HOST via the telephone line and a modem through which they are able to receive communication services such as E-mail, conferencing, computer file transfer and information services. What follows is a brief synopsis of the services relevant to this discussion:

1. Bulletin Boards. These function as public noticeboards and are only available to subscribers of the GeoNet network. The Bulletin boards are broken down into three distinct types namely: information boards, which provide details of public services such as the addresses and opening times of Citizens' Advice Bureaux across Manchester; public discussion boards, including boards relating to disability, human rights and the Internet; and private boards such as those maintained on behalf of the Labour Party and a number of trade unions. In some respects the Bulletin Boards have been made redundant by the growth of the WWW which allows information providers to publish their data on an internationally accessible medium, however, for those organisations wishing to restrict access to information to members only, the Bulletin Boards remain a useful device.

2. Public Information. This includes connections to public information providers such as the Citizens Advice Bureau. All Neighbourhood offices and Housing Offices are now on-line and a local advice workers network is being set up by the City Council. The service, called Manchester Advice Network will include all welfare rights officers, money advisors, housing aid advisors, as well and the voluntary sector advice agencies.

3. E-mail. This communication facility is generally regarded as one of the most useful aspects of computer mediated communication (CMC) allowing quick and inexpensive exchange of information between networked individuals. However, its practical benefit to the citizens of Manchester, either as a communication tool between each other or as a means of receiving information via mailing lists, is limited by, in the words of one of the training staff at Chorlton Electronic Village Hall, "the first telephone thing — were you can only really use it when everyone else uses it" (Robinson 1995). Whilst the growth of the Internet has let to more people having access to E-mail, this is more often that not through workplace facilities.

4. Internet/World Wide Web. When the Manchester initiative first began the Internet was not seen to offer a likely route to the attainment of the project goals. However, the rapid growth of this particular communications technology led POPTEL to establish a series of a home pages on the WWW for themselves and a number of the City's information providers (Manchester Housing, CAB, MIND) in 1995. This allows individuals who have not subscribed to the HOST to use graphic based WWW browsers to look around the services provided by the Manchester initiative.

5. The Electronic Village Halls (EVHs). The EVH's are central to the Manchester Initiative. The concept of the EVH had its origins in Scandinavia in the mid 1980's, as an attempt to overcome some of the employment problems generated by the geographical dispersion of the population, and as such EVHs are generally orientated to

the provision of training in the use of ICTs and the extension of skills to previously marginalised sections of the community EVHs.

The development of the EVHs in Manchester is particularly pertinent to the discussion of the democratic implications of the Manchester initiative. Initially a number of existing community based organisations were invited to take part in a tendering process to win funding for a period of two years. It was decided by the City Council that existing community based organisations should be encouraged to take part in the tendering process as well as organisations which had been constructed specifically for the EVH tendering process. Of the three EVHs currently in existence, two — Chorlton Workshop and the Greater Manchester Bangladesh Association and Community Centre — were existing community based organisations and as such they continue to have their own distinctive identity above and beyond their work as an EVH and this is manifest in the individual perspective each has on the role they perceive for themselves in relation to the wider aspirations of the city initiative. The Women's' EVH was developed specifically for the initiative through the collaboration of several existing women's organisations, and it is for this reason that it emphasises its telematics function to a greater extent than the others.

Chorlton Workshop EVH, which characterises itself as "a small independent voluntary organisation" which "prioritises black people, women with children under 5, people with disabilities and people without further or higher education qualifications" (Chorlton EVH 1995, 3) runs a range of courses which reflect its origins as a community workshop. This includes instruction in knitting and sewing running alongside basic computer literacy courses, and Maths and English tuition. The role of Chorlton Workshop as a provider of telematics services, and its relationship with the other EVHs has been influenced by both its independence and its on-going struggle for funding. Since the core funding for the development of the EVH finished at the end of 1994, Chorlton EVH has received funding from a plurality of sources including the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), Europe/Manchester City Council, Charitable Grants and some income generation. A main strand of Chorlton's work as an EVH has been a project looking at the ways in which electronic mail and on-line information could support trading activities and this has included working with Manchester Local Exchange Trade System (LETS), a community trading system. The necessity of looking beyond the Host project for funding has led to Chorlton EVH trying to juggle the services it provides to fall within the different requirements imposed by different funding bodies and whilst its 1994 annual report acknowledges the increased interest in the Internet which has been generated by the national policy debate surrounding the "information superhighway" resources are limited and the lack of phone lines renders provision of E-mail facilities and access to the WWW problematic.

The Women's EVH and the Bangladesh Association are organised on similar principles, undertaking outreach work amongst marginalised members of their target communities and encouraging them to take advantage of their courses providing basic computer literacy skills. Whilst nominally linked by their involvement with the Information City initiative, only limited emphasis has been placed on encouraging networking between the three EVHs and Chorlton Workshop acknowledges that it "has both the strength of being self-directed and the weakness of not having the support available through being part of a larger structure" (Chorlton EVH 1995, 11). Similarly there has between no real attempt to provide a single forum in which the EVHs

and the community information providers can talk about the development of the project as a single, unitary entity. The extension of valuable computer skills to enable access to employment for women and ethnic minorities and the unemployed or previously unskilled is the priority of all those involved in the EVHs and there has been no formal attempt to encourage the utilisation of these skills in the discussion of public affairs and or the translation of these skills into civic action. One study in particular, that of East Manchester's failed bid in win funding to become an EVH (Ducatel and Halfpenny 1993), highlights some of the difficulties that imposing a concept, which had originally been developed to combat the problems of extending telecommunications services and related skills in rural Scandinavia, to urban Manchester has involved. Whilst any problems of credibility and the related fear that the EVHs might be a political fad which merely diverts scarce funds from other community projects seem not to have hindered the development of the three EVHs, it would be unrealistic to expect the EVHs to translate the extension of skills into a wider sense of civic participation. As Ducatel and Halfpenny point out; motivation of local participation in solving [these] long-term problems is likely to require more than a superficial engagement between a technically trained EVH officer and the community. If the Scandinavian experience applies to the British context, the EVH needs a local "product champion" who is enthusiastic, socially skilled, and knowledgeable about the area; initial technical skills are less important. The EVH will succeed as a community initiative only to the extent that it is seen by locals to be relevant to their own perceptions of needs and aspirations. It needs to be issue based, not necessarily technology based, with a language that is accessible (Ducatel and Halfpenny 1993, 377).

Whilst the feasibility studies commissioned by Manchester City Council prior to launching the Information City Initiative employed the metaphor of the "information superhighway," but its invocation has been used primarily to describe the potential of the development of an ICT infrastructure for economic growth, competitiveness and employment generation in the city. However, as the project has developed the growth in the media's interest in all things Internet related, including the social and political implications of this technology, has fuelled the perception that the Manchester Initiative should articulate its own democratic ideal. One of those who has been involved with the Manchester Initiative form the outset is Dave Carter of MCC's Economic Development Department. Carter acknowledged that the main scenario being debated is an essentially optimistic one where the information superhighway will be able to support a wide range of new services which will empower citizens and provide for their full participation in an emerging "digital democracy" (Carter 1995a, 1) and warned of the dangers that are inherent in this view, namely that technology will serve to reinforce existing economic inequalities. Carter looks to the integration of regional, national and international "learning networks" to provide "the basis for a potentially powerful counter-balance to vested interests, in terms of corporate and state authority, which can be proactive in taking an advocacy role in relation to consumer, citizen and wider democratic interests" (Carter 1995a, 2). Whilst Carter is enthusiastic about the initiative generally and keen to get across the Council's commitment to democratic as well as economic regeneration, Clem Herman of the Women's' EVH looks more thoughtful when considering the role of democracy in the initiative. "It's certainly becoming more of a priority — where we saw it starting was less about democracy and the involvement in politics, that's something that comes later, but what

we saw from the beginning was a generalised view of democracy" (Herman 1995). Other individuals involved with the project do not share the increased concern with the democratic potential of the Manchester HOST initiative. Andy Robinson from Chorlton EVH remains sceptical, "you look at the people who express and interest in the Internet — it's generally people — young, white, male and I don't know who's talking about democracy" (Robinson 1995).

It has been argued that this process, whereby the broader social and democratic promises embodied in the metaphor of the "information superhighway" at a national level have begun to seep into the City's own political agenda, is due to

> *the sheer complexity of the processes leading to the development of a large technical system such as the "information superhighway" do not readily lend themselves to precise modelling. The processes tend to be ambiguous and ill-defined, and accurate data is a rare commodity. In such situations metaphors and analogies offer a viable alternative to formal models (Sawhney 1995, 1).*

In this sense, the use of the metaphor of the "information superhighway" is a valid attempt to break down people's initial reticence about an alien cultural organisation and associate it with a set of issues which can capture the imagination. Whilst it is true that metaphors can help articulate a vision for the development of a new set of technologies, this vision will inevitably confuse technological possibilities with a set of associated social, political and economic aspirations.

At this stage, there is little evidence to suggest that the use of the information superhighway' metaphor has begun to influence the development of the various components of the projects in a way which is not appropriate to the needs of the communities in Manchester's but there is some evidence to suggest that wariness of the project is liable to be increased by the use of such rhetoric (Ducatel and Halfpenny 1993). In the USA, on the other hand, the most commonly adopted approach has been to target individual access to a central public information utility (PIU) through a combination of home based access via modems and the installation of public access points in libraries and other public institutions. The PEN project in Santa Monica is perhaps the most well documented of these projects and offers communication between individual citizens and elected representatives. The PEN system is not unlike the Manchester HOST in that it uses a mainframe computer to which citizens can have access via a personal computer and modem but unlike Manchester, the PEN system provides 35 public access terminals in places such as the city hall and public libraries. The rhetorical construct of participatory democracy is also evident in the campaigning activity of pressure groups such as the Alliance for Public Technology (APT) and the Alliance for Community Media have utilised a human rights and civil liberties discourse to argue for more publicly accessible communications services, controls upon the pricing of telecommunications services and the protection of free speech in CMC.

In a report prepared for Manchester City Council (Shearman 1994) it was acknowledged that the development of public information services in the USA had demonstrated how telematics could become part of the culture of the people living in the City and as a result of this that, "the development of public access multimedia points across the city ... would be an important element of overall strategy," (Shearman 1994) yet, to date, there are no concrete plans to pilot such public access points. Elsewhere in the UK local authorities have taken this route and projects such as those in Newham (Newham Council 1995), East London and Cambridge have used digital technology

to enable citizens to access public information services from distinct points.

Democracy in terms of political participation has not been clearly articulated until recently and the development of the articulation of this concept within the project seems to verify Guthrie and Dutton's thesis that rather than one individual or individuals' ideal of democracy driving the project, there has been an interplay between a series of interacting influences so that this articulation is neither unilateral nor static.

The organic nature of the project in Manchester, which is due in part to the funding arrangements which make long-term planning and ambitious proposals for expansion and development difficult and also in part to the lack of political direction from Manchester City Council. Whilst changes in technology and the explosion of interest in the Internet and a subsequent fall in the price of devices such as the modem which are essential to being on-line, have influenced the project it is changes in the political/social environment which are crucial to the articulation of democracy within the Manchester initiative. The "electoral politics game" (Dutton and Guthrie 1991, 292) which refers to the need of local officials to ensure reelection and whilst this force has not been an overt factor in the development of the Manchester initiative it is probable that the recent media attention devoted to the "information superhighway" and the Labour Party's enthusiastic embracing of social and democratic merits of ICTs will have awakened local officials generally to the electoral and media gains to be won.

The evolution of the Manchester initiative has also been influenced by interaction with other, similar telematics based projects in Europe. This interaction came about as a result of the interest in the potential of telematics of the individuals who were involved in the project at the outset and their desire to gather information from other cities who had already used this technology (Walker 1996). Manchester was already a member of the Eurocities organisation, which is a European association of local government authorities and has been active in the technological co-operation committee. As a result of the development of informal relationships between the various European telematics projects Manchester City Council held a European conference of Eurocities members who were interested in developing work on telematics. The conference, which took place in October 1993, resulted in the Declaration of Manchester, a joint proposal from 12 cities to establish a new project called Telecities, a European wide network to encourage co-operation on telematics work and to examine ways of harmonising networks across Europe.

Part of this project includes the establishment of the European Telematics Partnership which, whilst explicitly claiming to be "Creating a Digital Democracy," has failed to include any reference to political participation in their current projects. Instead the projects include: the development of electronic trading networks, Development of an ISDN link between City Council and local HEIs and business networks, low cost E-mail, bulletin board and on-line database facility for Eurocities members, and the development of training facilities e.g. EVHs.

Beyond "MacDemocracy"

Much has been made of the potential erosion of the public sphere by an atomised, information orientated society which fails to come together in any physical sense to discuss issues of civic importance (Mulgan 1991). The attraction to direct democracy is rooted in a false notion of political community as simply the coming together of citi-

zens with their representatives in one single physical or virtual space, yet without the social conditions that provide people with a stake in the outcome of political deliberation no amount of high-tech wizardry will convert the pushing of a button or the dialling of a telephone number into an act of deliberation. This substitution of instantaneous reaction to a single question or set of questions could, rather than facilitating a return to some golden age of Athenian democracy, rather spell the death knell of democracy (Barber 1984).

How then can we usefully discuss the role of ICTs in relation to democracy without falling into the trap of accepting unconditionally the values implicit in the information superhighway metaphor and the over-dependence upon a narrow conception of democracy. I would suggest we look to current debates around Habermas description of the bourgeois public sphere and, in particular, the project of feminist academics (Fraser 1993) to reconceive the public sphere. Fraser has argued that Habermas effectively dismisses the ideas of social equality as a prerequisite for political democracy by "bracketing" or suspending such inequalities for individuals in this sphere. In the light of this analysis I would argue that the EVHs have served as an "unbracketing" mechanisms, where, by making explicit the social and economic inequalities of their target population, they reject the principle of their suspension. The discussion of the regeneration of the public sphere is an important project which asks critical questions regarding the nature and extent of public life and the ways in which individual citizens interact with this sphere. The public sphere can provide a impetus for the imagination so long as it is free of the nostalgic romanticism with which Habermas has described the establishment of a bourgeois public sphere (Dahlgren 1991). This question requires us to think beyond the application of ICTs and look more broadly at the communicative structures within which these initiatives are taking place and the political and economic context of their evolution. The Manchester initiative, partly as a result of its economic focus, has not employed an idealised version of democracy nor associated itself with the establishment of a bourgeois public sphere and this absence of democratic theory from its strategy for the future of the Information City initiative renders the project vulnerable to assertions that electronic networks can breed a new type of communicative citizen who is able to overcome architectural, geographical and economic displacement with access to on-line communities (Mulgan 1991; Rheingold 1995) or that "rooting cyberspace in the social realities of neighbourhood organisations increases the odds that the needs and priorities of potential 'have not' areas will be aggregated and expressed effectively. It is the activism of these kinds of grassroots organisations that eventually will push top-down NII policy in democratic directions" (Miller 1995, 248). What the Manchester initiative has done is lay the foundations for the provision of opportunities for public citizen communication in line with Fraser's notion of a reformulated public sphere. However, the majority of the visions for the "information age" as articulated by politicians and the media, will remain overly optimistic as they continue to privilege the technology over the role of human needs (Forester 1992).

Conclusions

The assertion that CMC needs to be informed by democratic theory (Hacker 1995) is substantiated by a preliminary investigation of the evolution of the Manchester Initiative and the danger of vulnerability to rhetorical diversions which arises as a

result of failing to engage in a discussion of the possible implications for democracy of any such project. The current political climate at the national level has brought democracy onto the agenda in a way which is more explicit than was previously the case. The potential of ICTs to open up new channels of communication between citizen and state has been seized upon in a series of national information infrastructure initiatives, e.g., the USA's National Information Infrastructure (NII) and Japan's MITI, and in the UK it has been the Labour Party which has seized upon this concept with the publication of the document "Communicating Britain's Future" (Labour Party 1995) which intoned the language and imagery of revolution. More specifically, the document states that "technology can improve the UK's system of representative democracy by streamlining the flow of information from government, by making decision-takers more accountable, and by enhancing the opportunities for citizens to contribute to political decisions" (Labour Party 1995, 21). Whilst limited initiatives in the democratic usage of ICTs are taking place at the city level, the results of these initiatives are by no means clear and there is little evidence to suggest that success at a local or city level could be used to predict the outcome of any national initiative.

Historically, the majority of writing on the subject of the development of ICTs and their democratic potential has fallen into a binary division between optimism and dystopia, with the optimistic strand of thought giving rise to the current political infatuation with technological development as a panacea for a range of social and economic ills. A debate constructed upon these fault lines does little to foster an environment in which the implications of choosing to invest in a particular technology are fully explored. The hype which has been stirred up is clouding the waters of discussion and fuelling unreal expectations from the development of ICTs, rather than bringing them into the public sphere for considered debate. As Richard Sclove points out, the development of any new technology has broader social implications than those to which it was nominally intended and these externalities are often overlooked in discussions of public policy and technology. Sclove asserts that "all technologies are associated with manifold latent social effects and meanings, and that it is largely in virtue of these that technologies come to function as social structures" (Sclove 1995, 20).

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